
Can Alaska Balance Economic Growth with Fish Habitat Protection?

A Legislator's Perspective

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This question formed the basis of a session at the Alaska Chapter meeting of the American Fisheries Society in Wasilla, Alaska, in November 1995. Participants were asked to give their prognosis for the quality and quantity of fish habitat in Alaska 10–20 years from now, especially anadromous fish habitat. The legislator's perspective was slightly modified for publication.

Balancing economic development with aquatic habitat protection reflects the reality of today's world and the challenges associated with the crafting of complex public policies. The key, of course, is the word *balancing*. Can we balance resource development with habitat protection? I think so. Our track record has proven that with focused technical input and a positive attitude, we can provide a reasonable balance. I would submit, however, that the art of balancing means approaching that responsibility over reasonable time frames and reasonably sized areas. Good public policies regarding resource uses may mean temporary tradeoffs or short-term sacrifices. The key is the ability to focus our technical and fiscal resources so that those tradeoffs are minimized and temporary.

AQUATIC HABITAT PROTECTION: ALASKA'S RECORD

Occasionally, we hear that Alaska is heading down the same road of environmental degradation and resource overexploitation that other states have taken. In my opinion, this is not realistic. Yes, we have our resource-use conflicts, and we can point to some embarrassing mistakes. Developing proper management and regulatory structures and sound resource management and development strategies has, out of necessity, occurred gradually, and it has taken time to incorporate the newest technologies.

Alaska, however, does not have an equivalent of the Columbia River problems associated with hydropower. Hydropower production in Alaska has generally been compatible with both fish and wildlife interests. Alaska does not have the massive chemical pollution problems associated with farm production in the midwest or western United States. Certainly, community expansion has had very little impact on the overall fisheries production in Alaska. Yes, there are local conflicts associated with municipal needs, but by and large, these conflicts have been adequately handled through the Coastal Zone Management process or through the state agencies.

Alaska has a sound base from which to work and a progressive constitution, which clearly stresses sustained yield, public benefits, and responsible resource development. We have crafted some of the most progressive organic statutes that direct our resource management agencies, such as the Department of Natural Resources and Department of Fish and Game, to maintain our resource base.

When attempting to evaluate potential impacts of future economic development activities, one has to at least examine what mechanisms are in place to protect vulnerable resources like fish and fish habitat. A significant portion of Alaska, including many of the most critical areas, have been given special protection.

To quickly summarize, over 60% of Alaska is in long-term federal management classifications: 77 million acres of wildlife refuges, 50 million acres of

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national parks, 34 million acres of Bureau of Land Management land, 22 million acres of national forests, and 3.2 million acres of military and other federal holdings. All in all, 35% of Alaska's total land mass is in federal parks and refuges, the most restrictive of classifications, and 32% of all wetlands in Alaska are also included in these 2 systems.

Even on supposedly multiple-use lands, like national forests, significant portions are removed permanently from developmental activities, such as logging. For instance, over two-thirds of the forested areas of the Tongass National Forest exclude timber harvesting entirely. Alaska also has 25 rivers classified as Wild and Scenic Rivers, which protect over 3,000 mi of pristine river habitat.

Alaska has title to 120 million acres of land, including inland navigable waters. In only 36 years Alaska has set aside over 11 million acres in state refuges, parks, critical habitat areas, forests, recreational areas, marine parks, preserves, special management areas, and special public-use areas. Over 4 million acres or 39% of these withdrawals are considered wetlands.

Specific to fisheries, Alaska has identified 14,932 anadromous streams and lakes in the current catalog of waters important for spawning, rearing, or migration of anadromous fish. The commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game has been delegated considerable permitting authority over activities occurring on these cataloged streams and lakes.

If you examine all of the above-mentioned protective devices, that some of Alaska's fisheries resources have been increasing since statehood, and that Alaska has produced 4 record harvests of salmon over the last 5 years, it seems logical to assume that we are on the right track. Certainly, we have a good foundation from which to work.

ALASKA'S ECONOMIC AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

I believe most people would agree that Alaska needs to look at innovative ways to develop its resources. Economically, we still have a large number of communities that have no permanent employment. Many Alaskans live on the edge of poverty in Third World living conditions. The availability of many modern conveniences, taken for granted elsewhere, are practically nonexistent in many Alaskan communities.

Alaska is facing a major shortfall in revenues as North Slope oil production declines. Estimates place the 1997 fiscal year deficit at approximately \$500 mil-

lion. It is obvious to all of us that the state is faced with major fiscal decisions in the near future. Service reductions, taxes, capping of the permanent fund dividends, use of reserves, use of permanent fund earnings, and downsizing government are all being considered to close this gap.

If Alaska is to meet its economic responsibilities to its citizens, it is imperative that some developmental strategies be prepared that provide for economic self-sufficiency for all residents. Although tourism and fisheries are major contributors to the state's economy, the benefits are not universally distributed, and much of the economic benefits are still seasonal. Alaska must look to the future by tapping its other renewable and nonrenewable resources. In my opinion, this can be done in an environmentally sound manner.

Alaska's infrastructures, especially those promoting low-cost transportation, are primarily centralized, creating an even more difficult task to compete in today's competitive global markets. Huge federal withdrawals place nearly insurmountable obstacles in the way of the practical creation and development of transportation and utility corridors throughout the state. These barriers often create additional problems by diminishing the state's options to significantly mitigate environmental conflicts. Certainly, a more cooperative atmosphere between federal and state governments would enhance our ability to meet the economic needs of our citizens with less impact on competing resource values.

BALANCING PUBLIC NEEDS

Balancing public needs is not an easy task, but it can be done. Where public policies are being made to integrate resource development and resource protection, the process is almost as important as the product. Artful balancing of public needs demands the public as part of the process. Equally important is the need to properly present the risks involved and the potential tradeoffs.

I maintain that the issue of resource development versus resource protection is not a black-or-white issue. Frequently, risks can be substantially reduced and impacts minimized or mitigated. All too often the debates have taken on an all-or-nothing flavor. The secret is the blending of the necessary technical information with all alternatives and options in the hope that a reasonable and wise course can be prepared.

Can we always produce development projects that are virtually risk free? I doubt it. The question is whether or not the public has been adequately informed and

whether a well-informed public is then willing to assume some risks in exchange for the projected public benefits.

Although we can all think of a few bad examples of resource development projects in the lower-48 states and Alaska, there are some good Alaskan ones that can be used as models.

I believe that, by and large, the development of the North Slope oil reserves has been positive for Alaska. The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill was certainly a major catastrophe, but I still believe that most people would rate Alaska oil development as in the best public interest and beneficial. Many of the forecasted disasters did not occur, and resource impacts, both at the terminal areas and along the pipeline, have been relatively minor and justified when balanced against the long-range benefits of oil production to Alaskans.

Similarly, after looking closely at the Cook Inlet and Swanson River oil development projects, I would maintain that the impacts have been minimal and the public benefits well justified in the long term. In addition, mineral development projects like the Red Dog Mine, Fort Knox project, and Greens Creek Mine show that proper safeguards can be included to protect other public values, like fish and wildlife, while maintaining economically viable projects.

Is it possible to conduct a placer-mining operation with virtually no impact on other resources? Probably not. For one thing, some people believe a placer-mining operation is unsightly or not visually appealing. The major public policy decisions here are what minimal environmental standards need to be applied, how can we minimize the impacts, is mitigation necessary and feasible, and what is required for restoration? From my perspective, I think it is a proper public policy decision to approve a placer-mining operation that results in a 10% reduction in fisheries production over the 10-year life of the project, if and provided the fisheries habitat production capabilities are restored at the end of the project to predisturbance levels. In making that decision, we must weigh the human values: impacts from a temporary reduction in fisheries production versus the benefits of the mining operation.

Wetlands are an especially controversial subject in themselves. Alaska is blessed with most of its wetlands still intact. Some states like Ohio have seen the loss of over 95% of their original wetlands. In Alaska we recognize the value that wetlands play in the ecology of fauna and flora. Unfortunately, a big percentage of Alaska is technically considered to be wetlands

under federal law. I believe most of us would agree that all of Alaska's wetland areas are not identical in their importance in the scheme of things. I support the concept of a rating system that would categorize wetlands from those of highest priority to those of lowest priority and not apply the same rigorous requirements for mitigation and avoidance to the lowest category as is applied to the highest.

It seems that no subject stimulates more discussion and polarization than the issue of logging in Alaska — particularly in Southeast Alaska. If the issue was limited strictly to conflicts between logging and fisheries, I have no doubt that reasonable and workable compromises could be crafted. I believe it is possible to maintain a viable logging industry in Southeast Alaska and not significantly affect our fishery resources. If a person detests seeing a logged area while fly fishing for cutthroat trout on a remote lake in the region, he or she is not going to be happy with any compromise that affects their favorite fishing hole. Biologically, however, I don't think there is much doubt that we have or could have the technical capabilities to truly minimize the impact of logging on the fishery resources.

Just look at the strides that have been taking place in the last few years. Where the logging and clearing of areas adjacent to streams was once a standard practice, we are now providing buffer zones and replacing woody debris in the streams in order to simulate natural conditions and improve fisheries habitat. The key, of course, is the directing of our technical staffs to develop the mechanisms of making these supposedly competing resources more compatible. Once the public policy decision is made that some level of timber utilization is extremely valuable to the public, then it seems to be the primary responsibility of our public servants and the industry to identify and implement ways to minimize conflicts.

There are going to be instances where public policy decisions will have a significant negative impact on some resources and other public values. Urban development may adversely impact a segment of a popular trout stream tributary as a major metropolitan area looks to meet public demands for unpolluted water. Some wetland areas will be lost as communities expand and basic human needs are being met; other areas will be preserved. The challenge is, of course, to present all of our technical knowledge in such a way that the public fully understands the tradeoffs and risks of such public policy decisions. Inevitably, this process leads to better public policymaking with generally minimized risks and maximized benefits.

PUBLIC POLICY TOOLS

Resource-use conflicts can only be reduced or eliminated if the policymakers have the tools and the incentives necessary to craft reasonable solutions. State regulatory agencies and the industries must cooperate and focus their priorities on the development of baseline information needed to develop functional alternatives when resource uses are competing. Increasing budgetary constraints can be an impediment, but this challenge may also catalyze the streamlining of ineffective and inefficient policies. For example, prioritizing wetlands could reduce the degree and frequency of conflicts.

From a fisheries standpoint, it is clear that some standards are necessary. Minimum instream flow requirements may be needed where water use could exceed flows needed to sustain fish populations. Additional attention may be needed to protect wild stocks if fish farming is ever considered seriously again in our state.

CONCLUSION

I am optimistic that our fisheries resources will survive and prosper during the next 20 years, in part

because Alaskans are more aware of the diverse values of our natural resources and the need to manage their use wisely. I believe this because most of us are committed to the task of balancing resource development needs with other public resource needs to ensure our valuable fishery resources are perpetuated.

Despite all of the rhetoric to the contrary, Alaska has an outstanding record to demonstrate our resolve. We have, in our short history, provided our resource management agencies with some of the best regulatory tools in the nation. We have identified, classified, and legislatively withdrawn some of the most critical habitat areas as state parks, refuges, critical habitat areas, and other such designations.

Our long-term commitment to plan for and implement a rational resource development program for Alaska is essential. With the proper tools and the right "can do" attitude, we have the opportunity to provide for the economic stability that all of our citizens deserve. Economic viability will not come, however, without some sacrifices and temporary tradeoffs. The key is our willingness and ability to place the tradeoffs and alternatives on the table so the public and the policymakers have the information necessary to make those value judgments.

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